



SB 929: AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS

Dear Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, and Members of the Committee on Children,

My name is Dawn Crayco and I am providing testimony as the Northeast Regional Policy Director for FoodCorps and a Steering Committee member of the CT Farm to School Collaborative. I am writing to request your support for **SB 929: AN ACT EXPANDING SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE FREE SCHOOL MEALS TO ALL STUDENTS.**

[FoodCorps](#) is a national non-profit with a vision for every child to experience the joy and power of food in school. For over 10 years we have partnered with Connecticut communities to place emerging leaders in schools to teach food and nutrition education, support school gardens, and introduce and expose children to nutritious foods in the cafeteria setting by encouraging them to try new things. FoodCorps is also on the leadership team of the [CT Farm to School Collaborative](#) - a network of over 40 partners including non-profits, state agencies, and community stakeholders working to increase farm to school programs throughout the state.

Food is a basic human need for everyone — but especially for our kids. Without food, kids can't learn and grow to their potential. The reality is that 1 in 8 children in our state struggle with food insecurity with so many others feeling the pinch in their wallet right now with inflated food costs. Some Connecticut districts with a high threshold of socio-economic need are able to offer free school meals through a federal provision. This includes all of the districts where FoodCorps has programming. What I can share with you is how beneficial it can be **to all students in all towns and cities.**

Based on federal guidelines, in order to qualify for free meals a family of four cannot make any more than \$36,075, pre-tax, per year. According to the United Way's ALICE Report, the updated Household Survival Budget for a family of four in Connecticut is **\$90,660**. 38% of households in our state have income which falls below what is needed to pay for basic necessities such as housing, food. Racial and ethnic disparities in hardship are prevalent with Black and Hispanic households have a disproportionately high percentage of families below the ALICE Threshold (57% of Black households and 63% of Hispanic Households in

Connecticut). Families are falling through the cracks and students are impacted the most. Students are impacted by leaving the cafeteria hungry and returning to their classrooms not ready to learn and engage which can bring negative behaviors impacting the whole classroom environment.

Every meal in a school cafeteria is a social and emotional experience. I think about my experience growing up- deciding where to sit, with whom, and comparing the discounted lunch I received with what others purchased or brought from home. Students who have nothing certainly stand out and can have feelings of shame and isolation. This bill would be a transformational move for CT schools, students, and families. One that ensures every child has access to what they need to grow and thrive in school and beyond.

Additionally, school nutrition programs in CT can be strengthened by investing in farm to school efforts which support more nutritious, local foods being served in the meals and educational efforts so students have hands-on learning experiences in the classroom or a garden giving them the life skills to grow, cook, and prepare foods. I would like to recommend this bill also support expanding our state's farm to school program including:

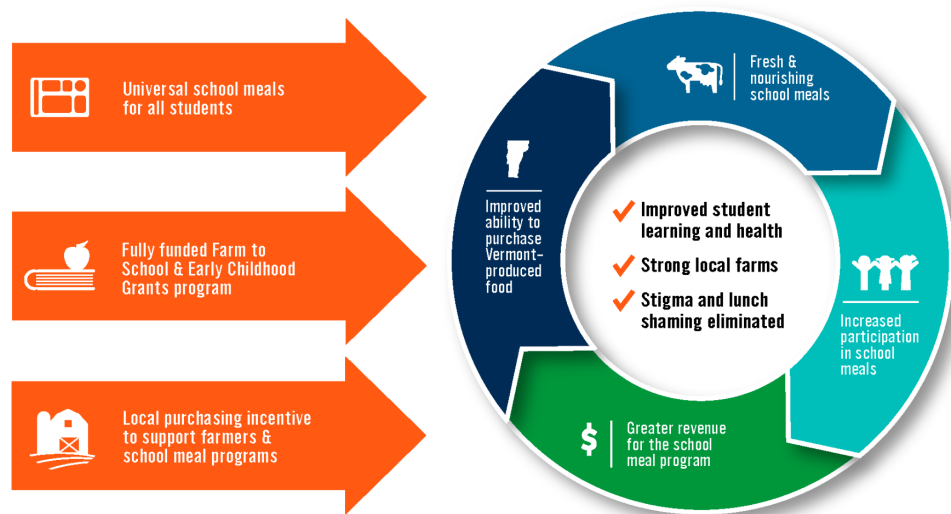
- Permanently funding the successful ARPA funded CT Grown for CT Kids Grants Program which is estimated to impact over 16,000 students in 32 communities. This successful program is building gardens in schools, facilitating partnerships with local growers, providing much needed equipment and training to teachers and school nutrition professionals. Grant requests exceeded the amount available by over 1.3 million dollars. The demand and proof are there. Research shows that students in schools with more hands-on learning activities (like garden and cooking classes) consume up to **three times the amount of fruits and vegetables** as students who receive less of that hands-on learning. The education piece goes hand in hand with access to nutritious, fresh school meals.
- Establish a CT Local Food for Schools Incentive Program which incentivizes school districts to purchase from local growers by providing \$1 back for every \$2 spend on CT Grown foods. 15 other states have seen the economic return on this type of policy and we know from CT school nutrition professionals that cost can be a top barrier to purchasing local.

An investment in School Meals for All with farm to school creates a “virtuous cycle” (see diagram below). When meals are free to all students, participation increases. When more students eat meals, more federal dollars flow into the school meal programs. This coupled

with local purchasing incentives helps schools invest in meal quality. This purchasing also helps children build a connection to farms in the communities. The excitement this creates helps keep students participating.

School Meals for All and Farm to school programs strengthen student achievement, improve nutrition, and grow the local economy. Now, more than ever, we understand just how essential schools are for supporting student wellness. Providing schools with the resources they need to increase access to meals, start up or expand local food sourcing and education activities is a win for our kids, our farmers, and our communities.

The Virtuous Cycle



Source: Hunger Free Vermont

Thank you for your time and your commitment to strengthening policies that impact all our children.

Respectfully,

Dawn Crayco
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